

The Conococheague Aqueduct: *A Bridge through Time*

*Experience the only restored
operational canal aqueduct in North America*



PHOTO BY SCOTT CANTNER

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On August 8, 2019, the Conococheague Aqueduct restoration was celebrated by the Town of Williamsport and the National Park Service.

During the 19th century, the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal played a key role in facilitating commerce along the Potomac River Valley and serving as a lifeline for local communities. Canal boats traveling between the lowlands of Washington, DC, and the mountains of Western Maryland transported lumber, coal, agricultural goods and other cargo. A series of 11 aqueducts served as “water bridges” that allowed these boats to safely cross creeks, streams and rivers along the Canal. Many of these aqueducts still stand, in varying states of repair.

The Conococheague Aqueduct, the fifth of these man-made waterways, is located next to the Cushwa Basin at about the midpoint of the Canal, in the town of Williamsport, Maryland. Constructed with local blue limestone from 1833-1834, the aqueduct features three 60-foot arch spans that extend 196 feet between its abutments. After opening for navigation in 1835, the Cushwa Basin became the busiest of these “lakes” that functioned much like a round-house for trains, with sufficient space for the long canal boats to turn and then travel in the opposite direction.



The basin remained a hub for commerce until the canal ceased operations in 1924.

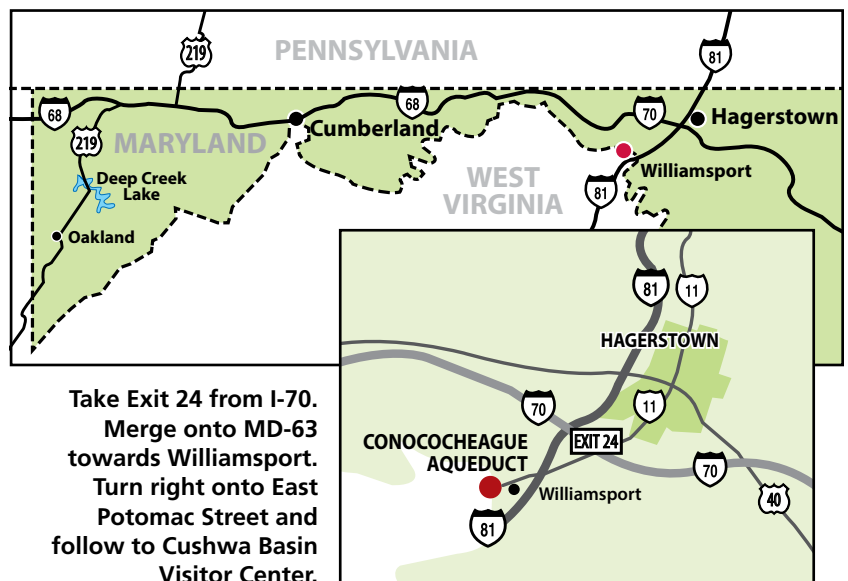
The aqueduct has endured, despite damage inflicted by natural forces and human beings. In 1862, after the battle of Antietam, Captain Russell commanded Union troops to destroy the Aqueduct to prevent General Robert E. Lee from escaping through Williamsport. During the following year, a group of Confederate soldiers known as Mosby's Rangers damaged the aqueduct to stop the transport of coal to Georgetown that was to be used by Union forces. In April 1920, a canal boat broke through the aqueduct's upstream wall and fell into the creek below. A timber berm wall repair allowed the aqueduct to function until flooding in 1924 dealt the final blow, and the canal closed permanently. In 1962 the aqueduct was stabilized with steel tie rods and concrete that helped maintain its structure until the National Park Service (NPS) reconstructed the wing walls.

Given its midpoint location, accessibility and historical significance, the Conococheague Aqueduct is considered the most accessible

The Conococheague Aqueduct during the two year restoration project.

aqueduct along the entire C&O Canal. Local and state officials have long recognized its potential to become a unique historic and recreational attraction that could allow visitors to experience all aspects of a working canal.

“Most parks provide for a single experience or pursuit but the C&O Canal provides opportunities and experiences for cultural and heritage tourists, historians, and outdoor





The Cushwa Basin was dammed to allow for the aqueduct restoration project.

adventure seekers alike. This universal appeal is an asset to the tourism economy” says Dan Spedden, President of Visit Hagerstown.

Restoration operations began in August 2017 as a collaborative project between the National Park Service and the State of Maryland, with funding provided by the National Park Service Centennial Challenge Fund, Maryland Bikeways, Transportation Alternatives Programs, and private donations for a total investment of about \$15 million. The NPS used timber and original stones in rebuilding the upstream sidewall destroyed in 1920, re-pointed existing stonework, and restored the aqueduct to a condition that made it possible to again carry water. Funds also were used to extend and waterproof the Cushwa Basin.

As of August 2019, the Conococheague Aqueduct is operational between Lock 44 and about 450 feet upstream for the first time since 1924. Visitors can now take a free interpretive canal boat tour along the canal across a watered aqueduct, under a railroad lift bridge and through a working canal lock to the Cushwa Basin (*call 301-582-0813 for hours of operation*). Or they can paddle their own boat through the aqueduct. In addition, a walkway is available for pedestrians and for cyclists to push their bicycles across the span.

Upon arriving at the Basin, visitors can explore several notable structures and learn more of its history. The bright red Cushwa Warehouse, constructed from 1790 – 1810, has served as the Williamsport Visitor Center for the C&O Canal National Historical Park since 1995. Adjacent to the Warehouse is the Trolley Barn that once generated power for a trolley connecting Williamsport and Hagerstown, and now houses canal exhibits. Nearby, Lock 44 serves as an example of the gate mechanism used to operate the boat locks. The adjacent Lockhouse, one of 26 along the Canal that once served as homes for lockkeepers and their families, is open for guided tours and educational programs during specified hours.

The site also features two unique bridges. The Bollman Bridge was built in 1879 by a self-taught engineer who became known as a pioneer in iron bridge engineering. It still stands as one of his few surviving works in the United States. The Railroad Lift Bridge could move upwards much like an elevator when boats needed to travel beneath the bridge – and of course, when the trains weren’t running. Built in 1923, this ingenious contraption was used for only one year before the canal closed permanently in 1924.

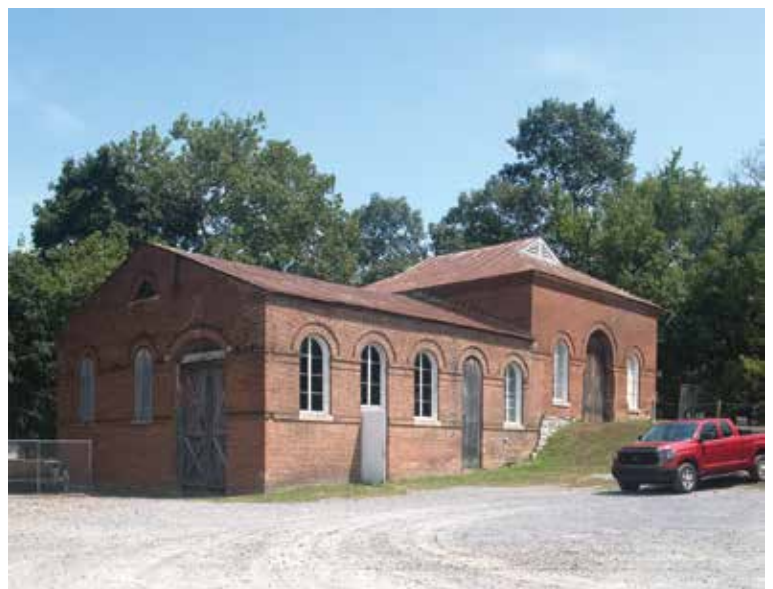
As the only operational canal aqueduct in North America, the Conococheague Aqueduct has the potential to serve as a catalyst for commerce in the region as it did in the 18th



century. The canal town of Williamsport will soon become home to the C&O Canal National Historical Park headquarters and a new visitor center. The Park headquarters is currently located in Hagerstown, MD. The move will bring about 70 jobs to Williamsport.

“This location will create a legitimate National Park Gateway to the 12th most visited state park in the U.S.,” says Spedden.

On August 8, the Town of Williamsport and National Park Service celebrated the Conococheague Aqueduct restoration and groundbreaking for a new visitor center and headquarters. In a statement, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan said, “Williamsport will become a first-rate destination, a must-see for National Park enthusiasts. A robust tourism economy will follow this important restoration and preservation project.” The future looks bright for Williamsport and the Conococheague Aqueduct.



Top: During the time of the C&O Canal, the Cushwa Warehouse dealt in coal, brick, flour, iron, cement, and plaster.

Inset: The Trolley Barn once generated power for a trolley connecting Williamsport and Hagerstown.

Bottom Inset: The Railroad Lift Bridge could move upwards when canal boats needed to travel beneath.